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THE COUNCIL OF
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Shahana Hanif
39TH DISTRICT

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Written Testimony of Council Member Shahana Hanif to the Board of Correction- July 15, 2022

Greetings, I am Council Member Shahana Hanif and I represent the 39th District in Brooklyn. I am also a member of the New York City Council's Committee on Criminal Justice. Thank you to the Board of Correction (BOC) for giving me the opportunity to submit testimony. I am writing to emphasize the immediate need to reduce the jail population.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BOC recognized the urgent threat to health and safety of detained people and wrote a [letter](#) to the Department of Correction (DOC) and the District Attorneys calling on them to "rapidly decrease the jail population". This played a critical role in the policy changes that resulted in bringing the population below 4,000 in April 2020.

Unfortunately since then, the jail population has ballooned to 5,475 as of the most recent census. This is unacceptable given the continued crisis conditions on Rikers. 16 people died in DOC facilities last year. 11 people have already died this year. It is beyond clear that the Department is not capable of ensuring the safety of those in its custody. Action must be taken to prevent more tragic and needless loss. As such, the City needs to prioritize decarceration and at the bare minimum, mimic the action steps taken in the spring of 2020.

This must include working with stakeholders to secure expedited release for as many detained people on Rikers as possible who are above 50, have serious medical conditions, are serving administrative sentences, or are serving city sentences. We also need to minimize the influx of people into the jail system, with a particular emphasis on alternatives to incarceration for those with serious mental health issues and substance misuse issues.

Reducing the population is essential to alleviating the current crisis conditions. This would allow for staff to be deployed more effectively, more minimum standards to be met without variances, and compliance with the State HALT Solitary Act—which the DOC is currently violating. Additionally, the adopted plan to close Rikers requires the City to reduce the jail population to a maximum of 3,300 by 2027—we need to get on track to meet this target.

I urge the Board to do everything it can to decarcerate, starting with a letter to the DOC and District Attorneys with recommendations on how to immediately reduce the population to below 4,000 and then coordinating implementation. This is a human rights emergency that necessitates swift action. Thank you for your time and consideration.